Big, Bad and Ugly – The concept of "the monster" in western culture

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Published in Jale N. Erzen and Pelin Yoncaci (ed.) *Aesthetics in Turkey* (Turkish Congress of Aesthetics Proceedings), Ankara: SANART, 2007, p. 439-446. *ISBN 13:9789944893091*

Abstract

Centuries before faith in science, the world lived surrounded by myths and, while heroes embodied hope, dangers were represented in the form of monsters. Gods and witches could then interfere in human destiny and apply justice by punishing those who seemed to lack humility. Individuals whose behavior was lacked compassion for their equals were morally closest to beasts and therefore punished through their bodily transformation. In the same way, disrespect for the gods was commonly responded to by a remark on humans' inferiority and their proximity to animals (as illustrated by the cases of Medusa and Arachne). In this essay the concept of "the monster" is analyzed (a) as an augury for some notable fact such as a catastrophe or a divine message in order to bring about human repentance, (b) as a being escaping the physical borders of human dimension and (c) as a person responsible for a dreadful crime. All of these definitions have in common the fact that they correspond to a type of being whose hybrid form is somewhere between the human and the inhuman. Without the characteristics that define humans as such the individual loses the right to live equally among other humans because, as Aristotle emphasizes (*Politics*, I.2), it is man's social character that defines him as a human being, otherwise, an individual who by his own choice lives outside a group must be a god or a beast.

Philologically, the concept of "the monster" has its roots in the word of Latin origin *monstrum,* formed from the verb *monere*, which means to warn[1]. The emphasis given to the concept of "the monster" is initially on its feature as a sign: (a) an omen for an important occurrence such as a catastrophe or (b) a divine message meant for human repentance. And although the concept of "the monster" knows a physiological dimension registered at least since Aristotle who, for example, considered "monster" a child that did not resemble to any of his parents[2], the prevailing meaning of the word until the Renaissance is synonymous of sign.

In the late fifteenth century the concept changed and the physiological aspect was stressed when the first studies on ideal proportions took place. "The monster" in the Renaissance is a being that escapes the borders of what was, by then, considered human normality. These studies on ideal proportions will subsequently be the main contribution to the establishment of aesthetic norms and based on this fact one could say that there seems to be no evaluation patterns corresponding both the concepts of "monster" and "ugly" before the Renaissance. The equivalency between those two concepts seems to be a result of a syllogism: if a monster is a being out of proportions and a being out of proportions is ugly then a monster is ugly. The portraits by Jan van Eyck, for example, which were acceptable to his patrons in spite of their ruthless registration of the "unbeautiful" details of the sitters' appearance, seem to support the idea that ugliness, as an aesthetic category, had not entered contemporary thinking on art or everyday life by the early fifteenth century.

In the 17th century the concept of "the monster" gained its ethical dimension, it was a characterization given to those accused of committing hideous crimes. In the prefaces of "Britannicus", in 1670 and 1676, Racine introduces Nero as "being born a monster" and the word monster was popularly used in many theater plays. The ethical dimension seems to be an extension of the correspondence between "monster" and "ugly" and accordingly opposed to "beautiful" which was synonymous of goodness by the Ancient Greek patterns. The "criminal monster", a concept that the press had happily adopted from the theater, became an independent object of study, during the 19th century, in criminology science and it distinguished itself this way from "the physically deformed monster", the object of study in teratology.

[1] During the Renaissance and the 17th century literature pointed the Latin verb *monstrare*, which means to expose, as the root to the concept of "the monster" but the verb *monstrare* seems to be also formed from the verb *monere*.
[2] Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, IV.3, 767b.

I. **The "monster's" function**

Concerning the use of the concept of "the monster" in western culture through history given its function one could succinctly organize it in the following way:

1. as a rationalization to the unknown or the unexplainable,
2. as an object of scientific research,
3. as a justification to the inhuman behavior
4. and as an aesthetic current to the expression of the sublime and fantastic.

1. **"the monster" as a rationalization to the unknown or the unexplainable**

Is it or not true that during the Middle Ages dragons still lived in the unexplored regions on earth until the arrival of men caused the dragons' vanishing? With the dragons' disappearance faded the action of knights and, in a certain way, the fantasy of everyday life men became poorer. The dragons, nonetheless, continued alive, sleeping, in the hearts of a few dreamers, and waking up every time men needed dreams. The knights that heroically gave their lives for the love of a lady were obliged to retire disenchanted with the surrounding lack of honor. Like Don Quixote who instead of fighting giants stroked windmills because the environment stopped fulfilling his spiritual needs with the introduction of a mechanical interpretation of the world[3].

2. **as an object of scientific research**,

During the Renaissance the concept of "the monster" started being used to qualify people and animals that suffered from serious morphological deformations or beings with unusual scheme. This clinical interest, also common during the Enlightment, was related with the passion for the different, which was caused in a great degree by the discovery of a numerous new animal species outside Europe. Subsequently this interest was extended by the extremely popular expositions of strange beings[4].

3. **as a justification to the inhuman behavior**

The designation of "monster" became common when applied to murderers. During the first steps of social psychology one of the main issues was if crime was a component of human nature or was instead socially acquired[5]. Madness and demonic possession gave their place to psychiatric research while criminology researched scientifically "the monster" inside each one of us.

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[3] An idea developed by Ortega y Gasset in his book *Meditaciones del Quijote.*
[4] One example is the anatomy collection at the Kunstkammer Museum in St. Petersburg.
[5] In the 19th century this was the main disagreement between Lombroso (who supported that the acts of certain criminals were motivated by hereditary causes) and Gabriel Tarde (who defended that many criminals were product of environmental conditioning especially education and imitation of others' examples).

4. **as an aesthetic current to the expression of the sublime and fantastic**

Since the Early Medieval Ages hybrid monstrous figures seemed to be commonly appealing to artists[6] but the phenomenon is possibly connected with the need to strikingly register an extraordinary, marvelous or fantastic universe in which the monster was a mean to bring the occult to the light. But it is during Romanticism that the monster achieves its higher level of significance. The monster expresses the feeling of insecurity concerning the ethics involved in the progress of technology and in the pursuit of unlimited knowledge, as in the case of gothic novels *Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In opposition to classical mythology where the monster plays a supporting role to the glorification of the hero's action, after Romanticism the protagonist will be the monster: from *Dracula* to *Alien*. In fine arts, ironically, the *demon* is the human compulsion to destroy, according to Goya, it is man's alter ego, his darkest side[7].

II. The origin of "monsters"

During history the existence and characterization of monsters has been explained in different ways. In this research the type of monster treated is the hybrid within animal and human species.

1. The hands of the gods

In Ancient Times gods created the monsters. It was a time when humankind lived surrounded by myths. In that world, centuries before unconditional faith in science, dangers were represented in the form of monsters. The gods still interfered in human destiny and punished those who showed no humbleness. Divine intervention for ethical purposes seems to be manifested through two different ways: the internal reflection (perception and understanding of the image on behalf of the reflected one) and the external marks (stigmata).

a. **the internal reflection**

Reflecting objects such as mirrors do not limit their power to the reflection of the appearance of those who stand in front of them. In mythology, fairytales and literature the mirror can be source of true knowledge, passage[8], prison of dreams and originator of fear and nightmares[9]. In mythology gods have used all sorts of mirrors and their reflection to impose their will upon humankind.

Narcissus, a young man owner of a beauty out of proportion, is evidence that not all monsters are ugly. He was also extremely presumptuous, comparing his looks to the gods Dionysus and Apollo, and cold hearted, rejecting all those who desired him, bringing them to despair and destruction. For such actions he is condemned to fall in love with his own reflection on the water and to know in the flesh the

[6] *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch (1460-1516) and *The Triumph of Death* by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525-1569) for example.
[7] Others are Henry Fuseli and William Blake.
[8] The mirror in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in the other side of the mirror*.
[9] In the work of Jorge Luis Borge.

pain of not corresponded feelings. A prisoner of desire, he stands still in front of an image that attracts him but does not correspond him and, without knowing that it is his own image the one that he is watching, he kills himself and gives an end to the unbearable pain[10].

Not all the monsters are big. A few of them do not need special muscle strength to bring terror among people and their eyes bear magic and curses imprisoning those who dare to see the face of what they are not able to understand[11]. Contrary to Narcissus, who brings up his own reflection, the Medusa is forced to confront the reflection of her own face on the surface of Perseus' shield. The same rule that once applied to her victims is now applied to her: death to whoever is confronted with the Medusa's gaze. She becomes victim of her own fate because the mirror shows no mercy to those that stand in front of it. And contrary to Narcissus who chooses death to the idea of existing without possessing the object of his desire, the Medusa prefers to die instead of living with the object of her horror, her own image[12].

b. **the external marks**

There was a time when the only way to erase the marks of evil was through hanging or burning. In the bodies of the newborns and the accused of practicing sorcery, the marks where searched only by the specialists. Later anyone who read the right guides could achieve the knowledge over the human mind[13]. In the 18th century the book *Physiognomy* by Lavater knew great popularity[14]. According to the author the book presented all the tools needed to uncover the truth about any person, defending that with a detailed examination of the physical characteristics it was possible to decipher the internal moral world of the individual.

Let us pass now to the discussion of the external marks on the human body caused by the metaphysical as a moral sign. King Nabucodonosor is cursed to madness and condemned to live among the animals and to behave as one of them by God. The change in his behavior caused by his mental illness, from a human to an animal conduct, results in the lost of his authority. It is society itself that casts him out, performing the role of the image of the divine curse's reflection.

Sometimes the consequences of human actions are so powerful that even the body itself refuses to erase these marks from memory. And when this is not the case, people commonly have succeeded in creating codes to warn society of the proximity of the undesirable, a few of such examples are the bells of the lepers, the stars of the Jews and the stripes on the prisoners' clothes[15]. Sin has very early gained the form of physical mark, from the time of Cain. Cain, a farmer, is cursed by God to

[10] Ovid, *Metamorphosis*.
[11] In the Old Testament (Exodus 33:20), when Moses asks from God to see His face, God's answer is that no man can survive to such an experience, allowing him instead to have a glance of His back.
[12] Ovid, *Metamorphosis*.
[13] In quiromancy, for example, is defended that the lines of the hand reveal the future developments in the world and in the personal life of the individual.
[14] Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741-1801), *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (1775-1778).
[15] The stripes are identifiable from great distance and they allow an immediate distinction between prisoners and guards.

become unable to make the earth produce and he is condemned to live wandering as a fugitive. He should not find refuge not even in death because whoever attempts against his live will be cursed seven times and in order to guarantee the divine justice, God places a sign on Cain so that no one will hit him on ignorance[16].

During Antiquity the existence of monsters was explained as a divine sign meaning destruction of a society or punishment of a specific individual. The Middle Ages will emphasize on God's goodness and less on his punishing character. The existence of monsters seems to be a matter of perception and evidence of man's lack of understanding concerning the Creator's purposes.

2. The witches' spells

If there is a metaphysic power responsible for the intervention in the normal development in a human life or for the creation of monsters it does not have origin in goodness. The magical intervention in the fate of men, which was previously a prerogative of the gods (such as Narcissus punishment), will be a role taken by the witches[17] in the Middle Ages. The witches apply penalty for ethical purposes when they punish, for example, those who show lack of humbleness towards the ones that are less fortuned in matters of power or beauty. In the world of fairytales the witches transform people into animals. In classical mythology monsters are commonly part animal and part human. Such examples are the Centaurs (half man and half horse), the Harpies (birds with the heads of women), the Hydra (a snake with numerous, sometimes human, heads), the Minotaur (body of a man and head of a bull) and the Sphinx (chest, feet and tail of a lion, wings of a bird and face of a woman). This preference for monsters with hybrids forms between the animal and the human species seems to be related with the people's fear regarding savage and uncivilized. But let us go back to fairytales and see what the witches have been doing.

a. The Frog Prince

A first example is a fairytale in which a witch punishes a beautiful but arrogant prince. He is transformed into a frog and condemned to live under this form until a woman accepts to marry him. A spoiled princess unwillingly gets engaged with the frog so that she can have her toy back. However the animal demands that she keeps her word and after the weeding the frog gets back to his human form[18]. What makes a simple frog to be considered a monster is not his ugly appearance but the fact that besides his animal characteristics the Frog Prince additionally possesses aspects of human behavior, meaning the

[16] Genesis 4:15.
[17] The witches are characterized as monsters because they control magical powers that can be used to cause evil. They are females with the power to reproduce themselves and for this reason they are considered more dangerous since they are a type of monster with the power to create other monsters.
[18] According to Jung, fairytales can be analyzed the same way as dreams and in the Frog Prince the story presented is a young woman's ritual of passage. Instead of seeing them in their human form she sees them as animals. The frog is actually a man who returns to his human form at her eyes when she denies sleeping with him. The moment of the refusal is at the same time the instant when she finally becomes conscious of her own sexuality and she is ready to see the prince in his human form. See *Man and His Symbols* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit in Fairy Tales*.

power to speak. This peculiarity characterizes as "monster" the Frog Prince because by joining the form of the frog with the human language he challenges the boundaries of animal and human kingdoms.

b. The Beauty and the Beast

A second example is a fairytale in which a prince of ruthless character gets punished by a witch and transformed into a beast condemned to live under this form until he conquers a woman's heart. The Beauty is a kind beloved person who accepts to live at the Beast's side to save her father's life. During their cohabitation, she will see the Beast beyond his appearance and love him for his qualities and gentleness. The confession of her feelings to him will finally free the Beast from the magic and he will become the attractive man he had been once. But in adaptations of this fairytale to theater or cinema[19] it is actually the change of the Beast's appearance that seems to fail to convince the audience. To the Beauty and to the spectator he had been already accepted. The Beast without his feature is reduced to a cliché of beauty prototype and that is the end of magic.

Medieval settings were an inspiration to many romanticists especially to gothic literature writers', supporting their narrative in mystery, awe, magic and supernatural to arouse terror. Gothic literature had many times as basic character a monster, an individualist, disruptive and never satisfied with the social restrictions placed on him. A few examples could be pointed out:

a. **The wanderer**

The wanderer[20] is someone who, for an ultimate crime against God, often blasphemy or unbelief, is doomed to an eternal but never pleasant life on earth. Usually he possesses supernatural powers, such as the gift to read the future and tries to find on earth someone that would freely exchange destinies with him but he never succeeds on his task. The wanderer is beyond fear because he turned into the taboo and with his transgression he became himself a source of terror.

b. **The vampire**

Another important monster in gothic literature is the Vampire: typically held to be the re-animated corpse of a human being, he is a transgressor of the law of mortality and an inversion of the Christian myth of sacrifice, subsisting on human and/or animal blood. Symbol of taboo, often having unnatural powers, the Vampire is extremely attractive and a source of infections.

None of these monsters were new but it was during the eighteenth-century that they suddenly erupted more furiously than ever. Cain is unconditionally a wanderer. And many of the "old" vampires in legends were women, such as Lilith in Judaic tradition and Lamia in Greek mythology. Lamia had a woman's head and breasts in a serpent's body and was said to steal children to drink their blood. She had been cursed by Hera to see all her children die and, jealous of other mothers, became a monster.

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[19] For example Jean Cocteau *La Belle et la Bête* (1946).

[20] The wanderer can be the symbol of the connotations range from the defeated aspirations of humanity towards perfection, a dreadful warning of the consequences of defiance.

3. Social constructions and civilized expositions

After Renaissance the fear gave place to curiosity concerning anatomy and teratology, but it was only after the decrease of the power of the Church over civil education that was registered development in knowledge and research on the human body. And if, during the Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the exposition of internal and external parts of chopped corps was a form of demonstrating the power of justice and an example to the possible transgressors of law, in the 18th century the exhibition of scientific anatomic demonstrations post-mortem in theatres become a spectacle[21].

In Russia, Peter the Great issued, in 1718, a decree about the collecting of monsters. The decree contained instructions on how to preserve specimens and deliver them to the Kunstkammer Museum in St. Petersburg. The objective was to study these specimens and try to explain the nature of physical defects. In 1728 Peter the Great bought the **R**yusch's collection, an anatomical "cabinet", which had been open to the Dutch public, with embalmed bodies of children, disposed in adorned small coffins. The "cabinet" completed the collection containing specimens of different physical defects and various degrees of twin accretion delivered at the Kunstkammer. The exposition is open until today to the public.

The maintenance of dwarfs and other "prodiga" as source of amusement was common practice during the seventeenth century in European courts. But the progress in biology and anthropology in the 19th century spread the interest for the different to the general population, having its most excessive expression in the human zoos.

From the 1870s onwards, shows with the goal of exhibiting exotic populations, behind bars or fences, were organized, in cities such as Paris, London, Hamburg, Barcelona, Milan or Berlin, attracting many times 200-300 thousand visitors. Soon, though, the interest of wider audiences took these shows into more peripheral areas through fairs and regional expositions. In the beginning of the 20th century, the enormous success of the human zoos was followed and completed by the exhibition of freaks (dwarfs, giants, hunchbacks, or albino blacks) presented at the exhibitions in Paris of 1909 and 1912.

During the human exposition the exhibited ones were supposed to perform their role dressed up with clothes specially conceived to enlarge the effect of their difference. Obviously they were limited to a specific area of the exposition and were not allowed to relate with the visitors: trespassers of the above would be penalized with salary cut. There was a fascination for the body of the "other", for his sexuality, his vitality and the embodiment of the link between the animal and the human elements (taken to the highest limit through the performance of breaking the taboo of cannibalism).

Along the more than fifty years of exhibitions very few people have revealed their concern about the poor conditions in which the exhibited were kept, responsible for the death of several individuals. If the subject of the human zoos does not have any scientific interest concerning the

[21] The last public autopsy performed in Britain was in the 1830s.

exhibited, the same thing cannot be said of the public attending the exhibitions. Who was the real monster?

Augustine refers that God created the human body in all its details having also in consideration its beauty, evident through the symmetry and right measurements of its components[22]. For these reason it is not the dimensions of His creations that dictate their importance but the understanding of real beauty, which is visible only to the Creator because only Him has the power to truly see the wholeness of his Creation. The beings that are considered by humankind as monsters, are judged at the eyes of men through the perspective of their own ignorance since they have no capability to understand the intentions of the Creator.

[22] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XVI:8.